1. **Background:**

1.1. The National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS) is the leading charity in Scotland dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. In Scotland, we have a dedicated team based in Glasgow and led by Heather Gray, Director.

1.2. NDCS provides a dedicated Family Support Service across the country. Our early year’s project, Your Child, Your Choices, delivers family sign language courses across specific geographical locations. NDCS also commissions research to inform the sector and engages in policy and campaigning activity to help make deaf children and their families a political priority.

1.3. Please note that NDCS uses the term “deaf” to mean all types and levels of deafness.

2. **Context**

2.1. This response will focus on one of the questions posed by the Committee in relation to the decision and outcomes of the Scottish Qualifications Authority: *How it has demonstrated leadership in ensuring that qualifications continue to be relevant to the needs of learners, educators and employers.*

2.2. The response will focus mainly on embedding British Sign Language into the modern languages curriculum in Scotland and the leadership required to address this.

3. **British Sign Language in schools: current context**

3.1. The latest data on preferred communication methods of deaf children in Scotland (CRIDE 2013) suggests 3% of deaf children solely use British Sign Language (BSL), around 12% use sign language in combination with another language and 0.6% use a sign system other than BSL.\(^1\)

3.2. Currently, NDCS understands a small number of children have the opportunity to study BSL at school, but none have the opportunity to develop their BSL skills right through secondary school due to lack of qualifying routes within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

3.3. There are examples of effective practice in Scotland, where BSL is embedded into the curriculum as far as possible. However even in these circumstances pupils are limited in how far they can take their study of BSL due to a lack of supporting infrastructure.

\(^1\) Consortium for Research into Deaf Education 2013 Scotland Report
3.4. NDCS recommends that by embedding BSL into the modern languages curriculum, the SQA can fill a significant gap in the current qualifications framework and establish new qualifications which are relevant to the needs of learners, educators and employers.

4. Rationale for embedding BSL into the modern languages curriculum

Promoting and raising awareness of BSL as a language:

4.1. Establishing new qualifications within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework would consolidate the position of the language as a resource of value to the national community, and part of Scotland’s communal heritage and identity. This would also help achieve the aspirations of the current British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, if passed.

Benefits for all pupils:

4.2. Embedding BSL would illustrate that learning BSL has the same advantages and benefits as learning any other modern language such as French, German or Spanish. It would give all children, including those who are deaf, improved opportunities to learn BSL.

4.3. Developing opportunities to learn BSL within the school curriculum would have the benefit of strengthening and enriching the inclusive education experiences of all children and young people. It would also complement the delivery of the curriculum for excellence, particularly the effective contributor and responsible citizen outcomes.

4.4. A growing body of research illustrates the range of benefits for children with bimodal bilingualism – those who use a signed language as well as a spoken language. These benefits include increased spatial working memory, mental imagery, and face processing.

Benefits for deaf pupils:

4.5. Establishing opportunities to learn BSL at school will ultimately lead to greater linguistic access for deaf pupils at school, among peers and more long term, within a society with greater knowledge of and skills in BSL.

4.6. In addition there is evidence to suggest that deaf children with stronger sign language skills may achieve higher literacy outcomes in the spoken language. The Deaf Achievement Project Scotland surveyed deaf pupils and found lower English attainment for deaf than for hearing students, regardless of the level of deafness. They proposed that the cause of lower attainment in English is reduced vocabulary in either sign or spoken languages.

An economic rationale:

2 O’Neil, Marschark and Ashad, 2014, Deaf Achievement Scotland Study
4.7. Given the shortage of BSL interpreters and qualified Teachers of the Deaf (ToDs) in Scotland, there is also an economic advantage to teaching BSL in Scottish schools. Currently, there are around 80 interpreters in Scotland and over 50% of ToDs are due to retire within the next 15 years. Additionally, around one third of ToDs are do not hold the mandatory qualification and 71% of peripatetic education services for deaf children do not have ToDs who hold a Level 3 BSL qualification (equivalent to a Higher)\(^3\). Embedding BSL into the modern languages curriculum could be a long term step towards addressing the significant challenges in this specialist workforce.

5. NDCS recommendations

5.1. NDCS recommends that BSL becomes an accredited school qualification within the full Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, and has the same status as other languages. BSL was recognised as a language by the Scottish Government in 2011 and the recognition and increased use of BSL in services is currently being promoted through the passage of the BSL (Scotland) Bill through the Scottish Parliament. It is therefore timely and relevant for BSL to be included within the Scottish qualifications framework.

5.2. Education Scotland’s 1 + 2 approach to modern languages provides a clear model through which BSL could be included within the curriculum.

5.3. The Scottish Universities Insight Institute has funded a partnership bid\(^4\) to carry out a Programme of Knowledge Exchange on the topic of teaching BSL in Scottish schools. The Programme will involve three seminars taking place with the aim to explore future possibilities for embedding BSL in schools. NDCS recommends that the actions arising from this national and multi-sector conversation are taken forward. NDCS welcomes the opportunity to participate in these discussions and supporting this process in any way we can.

For more information contact:
Katie Rafferty
Policy & Campaigns Officer
National Deaf Children’s Society
0141 354 7852
Katie.rafferty@ndcs.org.uk

\(^3\) Consortium for Research into Deaf Education, *Scotland Report 2014*
\(^4\) The partners involved in delivering the Programme are: Heriot Watt University, Bilingualism Matters (University of Edinburgh), NDCS, Scottish Council on Deafness, Moray House (University of Edinburgh)